Scholarly vs Popular Sources

Magazine and journal articles can usually be considered "popular" or "scholarly".

The following criteria can be used to identify "popular" magazine articles:

- articles are short, written by journalists rather than by scholars, and appear in popular, news-reporting magazines. These are the magazines commonly found in newstands, bookstores and supermarkets, etc. *Time, Better Homes and Gardens*, and *Sports Illustrated* are examples of popular magazines.
- articles frequently include glossy color photographs.
- articles are often unsigned and/or written by journalists; there may be no way to assess the accuracy of the information or the qualifications of the author. Typically no bibliography or list of sources used by the author to write the article is included.
- articles are usually informative and up-to-date and may deal with important contemporary issues, but they are not based upon scholarly research. Periodical indexes such as *Readers' Guide to Periodical Literature* generally list articles published in popular magazines but may also include some which qualify as scholarly. Other periodical indexes, such as the *Social Sciences Index, Humanities Index*, and *General Sciences Index* may list both popular and scholarly articles.

"Scholarly" sources have the following characteristics:

- articles tend to be longer, are written by scholars or specialists on the subject whose credentials can be evaluated, and appear in scholarly journals. Scholarly journal titles often begin or end with the words "Journal" "Review", "Bulletin", or "Research" or may include the title of an organization, such as "American Historical Association". Examples of scholarly journals are *Child Study Journal*, *American Economic Review*, and *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)*. Many of these journals are "refereed", e.g. articles are selected for publication by a panel of experts who evaluate them for accuracy and importance.
- articles may not be heavily illustrated, but tables, graphs, and diagrams are often included.
- articles are usually based on original research using established methodology which supports conclusions arrived at by the author.
- an extensive bibliography or list of references is included at the end of the articles. These allow the reader to see what sources were used by the author of the article. Footnotes and/or endnotes will be used.
- specialized, discipline specific periodical indexes and abstracts list scholarly journal articles.
Examples of indexes to scholarly articles include: Ulrich’s International Periodicals. This may be located through the library’s website in the “database by title” section. Simply, enter the title of the journal in question and check both the document type field and/or the special features field to see whether or not the title in question is Academic-Scholarly or Refereed.

The reference staff will be glad to direct you to the most appropriate indexes for your topic. Ask for assistance at the Reference Desk.

Books may also be "popular" or "scholarly". When evaluating books, you may want to ask the following questions:

- Are there footnotes and/or bibliographies which list the author’s sources?
- Is the author objective or is the subject receiving biased or sensational treatment?
- Is the author competent to write on the subject? The author’s credentials should be clearly stated.
- Who published the book? Books published by popular presses may carry less weight than those published by scholarly or university presses.

Sometimes book reviews will help you to assess the quality of a particular book.

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